Diversity and Freaks

Capt. Gabe Mounce, USAF

Illustration by Jim Elmore

In the May-June 2006 issue of *Defense AT&L*, I wrote about the funkified traits of small teams. In particular, I argued that small teams could innovate faster because they were free of the constraint that holds so many organizations back—bureaucracy! However, being small isn't the only factor that rockets an organization forward. To be smoking-fast, it requires something else: diverse and independent thinkers.

The trouble with most groups is the propensity to herd. True, like-mindedness often enables a group to move faster, but not always in the right direction. Herding is mainly the result of the strong identity the members of a group share with one another and the group as a whole, giving each undue influence on another and making dissent unimaginable.

Additionally, small groups (and groups in general) suffer from the illusion that collective decisions are all about coming to a consensus, which often, as James Surowiecki puts it in *The Wisdom of Crowds,* "encourage[s] tepid, low-est-common-denominator solutions which offend no one rather than exciting everyone."

But a small group can be much more than the sum of its parts. There is a way to enable small, speedy teams to point in the right direction, make wise decisions, and innovate faster: Encourage dissent and seek out the freaks!

Bring On the Dissenters

In order to tap into the valuable knowledge of every team member, foster an environment where ideas can flow freely, regardless of how kooky they may seem. This is the key to innovation and speed. You get the right solution more quickly when you allow all the ideas to surface and try them out as fast as possible. The good ones will stick, the bad ones won't. But squelching ideas before they've been fully articulated assumes that bad ideas can be identified beforehand from past experience—a classic mistake. Past success is no guarantee of future suc-

Mounce is Level I certified in T&E and PM, has over eight years' experience in defense acquisition, and holds an advanced degree in electrical engineering.

cess, and past failures cannot predict future outcomes. Similarly, squelching dissent sends the message that only "logical," mainstream ideas are acceptable, which serves to discourage creativity and innovation.

Dissent, not consensus, should be valued and encouraged. This is especially true when it comes to countering the ideas of the boss. Members of a team should have no inhibitions in challenging the thinking of the boss or flat out defying his or her ideas for that matter, as long as they have good reasons to do so.

> **"Where do good new ideas come from? That's simple! From differences. Creativity comes from unlikely juxtapositions."**
>
> *Nicholas Negroponte, head of the MIT Media Lab*

Dissent is usually a natural by-product of diversity. The best way to encourage dissent is to build a team of diverse people—people who come from different backgrounds, who have different appreciations, and who think differently. Diversity is the key to enabling small groups to break away from the mold of homogeneous thinking. The organizational theorist James G. March explains, "Groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning, because each member is bringing less and less new information to the table."

For a small group to move fast, it absolutely has to value wacky ideas and be willing to try them out as quickly as possible. This means filling your team with experts and nonexperts alike, with the naïve and the ignorant, with the old and experienced—and maintaining an environment of insolent respect.

Seek Out the Freaks

Encouraging dissent and diversity means finding people who value independence—and this often means hiring freaks. Freaks are the crazy people with wacked-out ideas. The 22-year-old college grad you ask to sit on the strategic planning committee. The finance guy you ask to look at the latest engineering plan. Freaks are anybody who doesn't fit the stereotype of who should be on the team. These people bring in that outlying knowledge that just might make the difference between producing something cool, quickly, or something dull, slowly. Tom Peters, the world-renowned expert on business and innovation, loves freaks. He believes that, as a society currently sitting in a disruptive age (an age of high standard deviation), we need to deal with "weirdness" by getting "weird" our-

selves. He describes freaks, in his book *Re-imagine*, as "Incredibly Cool People, statistical outliers, people on the fringe, mavericks with a willingness to take on the powers that be and risk it all, dissidents, rebels, exemplars, people who have the nerve to stand up, stick out, and fight conventional wisdom!"

He argues that all value, economic or otherwise, in the current disruptive age comes from intellectual capital—that is, ideas. Creative ideas. Innovative ideas. And the only way to uncover such capital is to encourage and seek out those that retain it—namely people you might not consider at first glance but who, nevertheless, bring that different angle into your perspective. Peters goes on to argue that current business has long flushed out these types in efforts to become more efficient and organized. Employees often "had to park their imaginations at the door."

To encourage diversity and dissent, it is incumbent on you, as a leader or simply as a teammate, to seek out the freaks and put them on your team. Instead of flushing them, encourage them to do their thing such that the intersecting threads connecting all the incongruent pieces are revealed. This also requires the team to value the minority opinions along with the majority, even if they seem far, far out there. What's more, you have to develop an environment that ensures these freaks and their ideas are safe from the corporate immune response, which is that most sinister of bureaucratic actions responsible for purging anything aberrant.

Don't Fear Failure

"Fail faster. Succeed sooner." Those are the words of David Kelly, founder of the design consultancy IDEO. Above all, you need people who are not afraid to make mistakes. At a profoundly deeper level, fostering diversity is all about relinquishing control and trusting the people you work with. As a leader this means giving teammates the freedom to use their own intelligence, to make decisions, and to make their opinions known. And I'm not talking about empowerment. I'm talking about a true handing over of the reins to the decisions of the group. It may seem too cumbersome and inefficient, but in reality, it is no slower than having a single person, who is advised on all the topics, make a final decision. In fact, it's usually faster because it allows solutions to percolate to the surface more quickly than if they had to traverse some type of hierarchy. Check out Surowiecki's research for the proof.

In his book *The Medici Effect*, Frans Johansson gives an excellent account of how the Allies, using a diverse team of codebreakers, conquered the German enigma machine during World War II. Enigma was the cipher machine the Germans used to encrypt communications between submarine units, allowing them to sink some 600 ships during the war. The Allies set up a team made up, Johansson

> **"Diversity plays a large role in the way we're developing our engineering organization around the world. … In the end, these efforts help us more accurately and relevantly represent our users, and our continued success depends on the best minds working from different perspectives and insights."**
>
> *Alan Eustace, Google senior vice president, engineering and research*

writes, of "mathematicians, scientists, classicists, chess grand masters, and crossword addicts"—in other words, not your typical cryptologists—to work the problem. Together, this odd assortment of people managed to break the code and turn the tide of the naval war.

Here's another case in point. The military analyst Thomas P.M. Barnett, in *The Pentagon's New Map*, advocates a military structure that is divided into two forces: the Leviathan force and the Sys Admin force. The Leviathan force would be what we currently think of as a military. It goes in fast, strikes hard, then gets out. The Sys Admin force, on the other hand, would be the force that operates by doing what the United States is currently trying to do in Iraq—win the peace. This force would be made up of social scientists, computer geeks, cultural experts, and linguists, all working to stabilize and build up a country. The Army recently began using such units, known as human terrain teams, to great effect in Iraq.

It's Not About the Cost

In today's acquisition environment, many PMs are loath to invest in any option that does not show some concrete evidence of success. The costs of acting upon the harebrained ideas of freaks are just too great. I argue that the cost of not taking this risk far exceeds the cost of betting on the sure thing. Even if this weren't true (and it is), the upfront cost associated with freaky ideas is far less than that expended through traditional means. Suroweiki states it well in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, saying that "what makes a system successful is its ability to recognize losers and kill them quickly." His argument—based on research with companies that have followed the principle—is that when you try out ideas really fast, you don't have time to invest a lot of money (simply because you can spend only so much in a short amount of time).

Creativity and innovation are essential to staying ahead of the competition, so most efforts to innovate are well worth the cost. Take Google™ for example. These, according to its Web site, are some of the things Google does to keep employees motivated and inspired:

- Google works in small teams to promote spontaneity, creativity and speed.
- Google listens to every idea, on the theory that any Googler can come up with the next great one.
- Google provides the resources to turn great ideas into reality.
- Google offers engineers "20-percent time" so that they're free to work on what they're really passionate about. G-mail, Google News, Google Suggest, AdSense for Content, and Orkut are among the many products of this perk.

And consider the U.S. military's own fairly recent success story: the Air Force Research Lab Commander's Challenge of 2006. The challenge: to find a way to stop vehicles from running checkpoints in Iraq without killing the passengers or destroying the vehicle. The freaks: two teams composed of six military engineers and scientists, each with less than five years' experience. The cost: $60,000 and six months.

Two of the designs thought up by these teams won. One device was a type of sled with two aluminum boxes containing airbags, one with a set of grappling hooks on one end. If a vehicle didn't stop, the grappling hooks were remotely engaged to latch onto the vehicle while the airbags deployed to lift the vehicle off the ground, successfully stopping it. The other device was a simple wooden wedge. If you didn't stop, your vehicle would run up onto the incline of the wedge and gradually stop and slide backward. Both ideas are effective, simple—and unorthodox.

It's All About Accepting Risk

In the end, it all boils down to accepting risk and accepting it in much larger doses than are currently tolerated. To build fast teams, you have to take up the risky proposition of diversity—team members who are not like you, but who come from different educational backgrounds, different cultural mindsets, and who might actually disagree with your ideas. You also have to accept the risk of giving up control to a set of freaks who might know more than you. Finally, you must accept the risk of failure—fast, furious, multiplicative failure. Only then can your small, dynamic team move forward quickly.

Only then can you succeed.

> The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at gabemounce@earthlink.net.